

WHAT FUTURE FOR JUDAISM IN RUSSIA?

The Dark Record of the Past

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THE several rabbinical delegations from America that visited Russia this past summer to see for themselves how matters stood with the Jewish religious community there have returned and made their reports. These have been uniformly gloomy. The scattering of people seen worshipping in the few synagogues or otherwise observing Jewish religious practices was almost without exception elderly; young Soviet Jews showed little knowledge of and less interest in their religion—small wonder, where the state discourages religious activity in general and specifically forbids Jewish religious education. As some of the visitors put it, Russia's "freedom of religion" permits the Jews little more than to attend services and give their dead a traditional burial.

Though unanimous in their diagnosis, the American rabbis—some of them delegates of the New York Board of Rabbis, others of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America—returned with conflicting opinions about the future of Judaism in the USSR. There were those who doubted that Judaism in any organized form could survive in the anti-religious climate of the Soviet state. On the other side, some prophesied in the accents of the Song of Songs:

WHAT kind of future can the Jewish religion look forward to in Soviet Russia? Challenging recent optimism on this score, Lucy S. Dawidowicz uses some little known sources to recount the long campaign of persecution waged against Judaism by the Bolsheviks, with a view to what may be expected in the years to come. Mrs. Dawidowicz, who studied at Hunter College and Columbia University, writes on political and Jewish affairs and has previously contributed articles and reviews to these pages. She is on the staff of the Library of Jewish Information of the American Jewish Committee.

*For, lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;
And the time of singing is come. . . .*

In the opinion of these latter, the present "thaw" in the Soviet world, with its promises of some small benefits to Yiddish culture in Russia, must surely extend to Jewish religious life. About the Russian Jews' own fears for themselves as Jews, two rabbis of the Orthodox group declared: "We have no reason to believe these fears are justifiable at present." After all, argued two other rabbis of the same group, "The Bulganin-Khrushchev administration is comparatively new on the job and is apparently sensitive to world opinion. It is an administration that has pledged itself to undo the great wrongs of Stalin."

Is the moribund state of Judaism in Russia something, however, for which Stalin, and Stalin alone, is responsible? Did Soviet anti-Jewish policies and practices start—as these two Orthodox rabbis claim—with the "brutalities which Stalin and Beria inflicted on the Jews after World War II"? Or didn't they rather have their beginning in the very first days of the Bolshevik regime? Discussing the scant knowledge of their religion which young Soviet Jews reveal, some of the Orthodox rabbis made a comment startling in the ignorance it betrayed of recent Soviet history: they professed to believe that in Russia "twenty years ago . . . it would have been possible to urge Jewish parents to teach their children how to read Hebrew, how to use the prayer book, and how to observe Jewish rituals."

But *twenty years ago*, almost to the day, the Great Purge began. When it had run its course, Jewish communal life in Russia, and Jewish religious life with it, was virtually

destroyed. Jewish schools, research institutions, newspapers, and publishing houses were closed. And it was presumably then that what religious life Jews had been able to maintain underground was rooted out. Russian Jewry has not recovered from these blows. It is true that, for purposes of international propaganda, the NKVD established the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during World War II; but this organization was liquidated in 1948, together with its personnel and its publication, *Einikeit*, when they were deemed to have outlived their usefulness.*

Because Jewish religious life since the October Revolution has been "un-history," Soviet newspapers, laws, and decrees record only its suppression and extinction. Occasionally, a visitor or journalist has brought some scrap of news out of Russia about the struggle of the Orthodox Jews to maintain the practices of their faith—but nothing more. Such being the situation, it is not so surprising that the most complete account we have so far of what Jewish religious life in the Soviet Union has been like should come from a would-be novelist: none other than a Lubavitcher Hasid writing under the pseudonym of M. Sambatyon, who escaped from Russia after World War II.

Though Sambatyon's 4,600-page book, *A Sixth of the World*,† is written in an extravagant Yiddish prose and needlessly complicated by fictional effects, it constitutes a remarkably accurate record of the life of the Hasidim in the Ukraine from the close of the civil war in 1921 to the end of World War II. And much of what it says is confirmed by scattered contemporaneous documents from underground sources inside Russia that now rest in the archives of American Jewish organizations, as well as by the reports of individual Jews who have escaped to the West since the revolution. The following account of the Soviet cam-

paign against the Jewish religious community makes use of information contained in Sambatyon's book.

WHEN World War I broke out, more than half the Jews of Czarist Russia lived in market towns and rural communities within the Pale. These were the *shtetl* Jews—peddlers, shopkeepers, petty tradesmen, artisans, and small entrepreneurs. Far from the urban centers of revolutionary activity and secular learning, the *shtetl* was the stronghold of Orthodox Judaism with its Hasidic variant. The Bolsheviks, as part of their campaign to extirpate the petty bourgeoisie, marked the *shtetl* for annihilation, and proceeded to abolish all its specifically Jewish religious and communal institutions—synagogues, schools, social service agencies, hospitals, etc., etc.—and to confiscate their property. Religious education was prohibited. Jews who wanted a place in which to hold religious services had to submit to the authorities a petition signed by fifty people pledging themselves to maintain the building at their own cost.

In the years immediately following the revolution, the anti-religious campaign conducted both by the government and the Communist party ran at full speed. Synagogues were converted into labor clubs; religious leaders were persecuted for "tax evasion"; pious Jews were subjected to indignities and humiliation.

In 1926 the Bolsheviks, initiating what is by now the familiar pattern of a period of tension followed by one of relaxation, granted the Jews and other religious groups a brief respite from the more violent measures of the anti-religious campaign. Jews began to hope again. A confidential report of July 3, 1926, sent from inside Russia to Jewish organizations in the United States, observed: "We can say that all the churches and synagogues can now function without the fear of being closed one fine day." The report went on to note that religious education was still strictly forbidden, and that to deal with this problem an underground meeting of some forty rabbis had

*For details see Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse University Press, 1951), and my review, "Two of Stalin's Victims," in *COMMENTARY* for December, 1951.

†*A zekster veltteyl*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1949-1953).

been called at which a committee of three rabbis (including the late Lubavitcher rabbi, Joseph I. Schneersohn) and two laymen was formed to direct the illegal network of Orthodox schools or "circles," yeshivas, and rabbinical seminaries functioning throughout Russia.

According to the same report, the underground schools then possessed an enrollment of 15,000 children. Money was urgently needed to maintain this secret school system, for, as the report stated, "the teacher is paid thirty rubles a month but we need the same amount for watchmen, and if the teacher is caught, we need about thirty rubles to support his family while he is in prison."

The optimism of 1926 was proven false within twelve months. The Bolsheviks signaled the resumption of their anti-religious campaign on July 14, 1927, when the GPU arrested Rabbi Schneersohn in Leningrad, charging him with counter-revolutionary activity, with extorting funds from Jews to maintain religious institutions, and spreading anti-Soviet propaganda abroad.* He was confined in Leningrad's Spalerno prison and there sentenced to death. As news of his arrest spread, Jews in Moscow and Leningrad hurriedly called secret meetings to discuss ways of saving the rabbi. Jewish delegations besieged the GPU with requests to have the death sentence changed. Katerina Pyeshkova, Maxim Gorky's wife and then head of the Russian Red Cross, interceded in his behalf.

Brief and rather vague reports about the case were published in the American Jewish press at the time, but the full story has never been given wide publicity. The Bolsheviks commuted the rabbi's death sentence to five years' imprisonment on the Solovetski Islands in the White Sea, but later reduced it to three years' banishment to Kostrama. As a result of negotiations conducted by German Jews through the Weimar Republic's foreign

ministry, the rabbi's sentence was still further reduced to enforced residence in the village of Malachovka near Moscow. Finally, negotiations by German and Latvian Jews, reportedly reaching as high as Georghi V. Chicherin, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and Maxim Litvinov, then his assistant commissar, won the Lubavitcher an exit permit some three months later. Rabbi Schneersohn subsequently used his influence abroad to raise funds for the further clandestine religious activity of underground Judaism in Russia, and for the relief of her Orthodox Jews, who were now in more desperate trouble than ever.

AT THE same time that they stepped up the anti-religious campaign, the Bolsheviks, now busy liquidating Lenin's New Economic Policy and all vestiges of private enterprise with it, moved to complete the disintegration of *shtetl* life by declassing its petty middlemen and self-employed workers and resettling them by force in the cities where they became "proletarians," and where Orthodox Jews were thrown into a strange new kind of life that challenged the very foundations of their Judaism.

Some of them became workers in small government *artels* (so-called cooperatives); there, according to the report of one rabbi from White Russia, they were forced to pass resolutions volunteering to work on the Sabbath and rest on Wednesday, and also to work on the High Holy Days. "Those not consenting," he wrote, "are discharged from the artels. Thus our brethren have worked on the High Holy Days and many who have not as yet erased their Jewish identity have cried bitterly, but couldn't help it." Another rabbi reported: "Daily the oppressive decrees are renewed; it has reached the point where the pious Jew cannot find work to support himself and his family. . . . In the artels the Sabbath and Holy Days must be violated publicly."

According to his official biographer, Rabbi Schneersohn had before his arrest "organized a special committee to help Jewish artisans and workers who desired to observe the Sab-

*The detailed story of Schneersohn's arrest and subsequent release is contained in a 79-page Yiddish booklet, *Di yesorim fun lubavitcher rebbn in sovet-rusland* (The Sufferings of the Lubavitcher Rabbi in Soviet Russia), Riga, 1930.

bath."* Sambatyon, in his book, enlarges on the subject, describing how, under the direction of this committee, observant Jews formed cooperatives that differed from the others outwardly only in that the workers passed resolutions to observe the Sabbath as the day of rest, but where Hasidim surreptitiously maintained kosher kitchens and used the period allocated to Communist indoctrination for prayer and religious study. After a year or two, the Communists put a stop to this kind of activity by bringing non-Jewish workers into these artels, and they, once in the majority, passed resolutions favoring work on Saturday.

The capture of the Sabbath-observing artels by the Communists made it even more difficult for religious Jews to earn a living. Sambatyon records a unique solution of the problem for elderly Jews: the career of night watchman. He writes: "The future historian, treating the life of the religious Jews in the Soviet Union during the thirties, will have to devote an entire chapter to these innocent night watchmen. This occupation had a prominent place in the life of religious Jews in the large cities at that time." He says that gradually pious elderly Jews took over most of these jobs in Kiev, Minsk, Odessa, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Rostov, and even in Moscow and Leningrad. Many of these night watchmen were rabbis; during their vigils in deserted factory and office buildings, their disciples used to join them for Torah study and religious instruction. The joke then current was that an applicant for a job as a watchman had to show his rabbinical accreditation, and, as the story went, "God willing, when times change and the good days return, and someone comes to the Jewish community and says: 'I am authorized to teach the Law, take me for a rabbi,' he will be told: 'Show us proof that you were a night watchman in those days.'"

The new anti-religious campaign was by no means limited to the abolition of the

Jewish Sabbath. In Kharkov, according to the report of another rabbi, the government took over most of the synagogues, and in the remaining synagogues the Communists "prevented services . . . by coming there with music and mocking at the worshippers." The government outlawed ritual slaughter: "Anyone signing an application for kosher meat is fined and regarded as a violator of the law." Another rabbi reported that for three years he had "preached religion and encouraged weak hands," and three times had been arrested. Then in order to continue to support his family of seven, he had applied for membership as a worker in a Jewish agricultural colony—despite the fact that Jewish workers in the agricultural colonies had to hold Yom Kippur services in the fields—but was told he would be accepted only if he agreed to publicize his resignation from the rabbinate. He suspected that the Communists would then have put pressure on him to work as an anti-religious propagandist.

ON APRIL 8, 1929, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and Council of People's Commissars issued a new decree to regulate religious bodies, one which superseded previous decrees and practices. With subsequent amendments, this decree remains in force in the Soviet Union today, and such organized religious life as still exists among Russian Jews is subject to the restrictions embodied in it.

The decree provides that a religious association may be established if twenty or more persons, eighteen years old or over, petition the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs for official registration. Within one month, the appropriate branch of the NKVD must register the association or "inform them about the refusal to register." The law fails to specify any grounds for such refusal, however. Once an association has been registered, it may obtain premises for religious services from the local authorities through contracts "entered into by individual believers upon their personal responsibility." This proviso reflects the fact that a religious association can have no legal corporate status.

*Nissan Mindel, "Rabbi Joseph I. Schneersohn the Lubavitcher Rabbi," in a collection of essays by the Lubavitcher, *Some Aspects of Chabad Chassidism* (New York, 1944).

According to Paragraph 17 of the decree, a religious association cannot engage in any form of mutual aid—such as medical or health assistance—or in any way directly support its members; nor can it hold meetings for children, young people, or women at which prayers are said, the Bible studied, religion taught, or even sewing done. It is forbidden to plan excursions or maintain reading rooms and libraries. In buildings assigned to a religious association for prayer, “only such books may be kept as are required in connection with that cult.”

Paragraph 18 prohibits religious education, and Paragraph 58 limits the performance of any religious ceremony or rite to the premises assigned the association, except in the case of rites administered for the dead or dying. Hence convening a *minyan* without official permission is a major offense. The remaining sixty-odd paragraphs of the decree specify in further ways the restriction of the functions of a religious association to prayer and ceremony, and expand on the various ways in which the local authorities may liquidate the association and confiscate its property.

Despite this new decree and the continued persecution, the Jewish religious underground was able to keep active. At the end of 1929, according to reports reaching American Jewish agencies, about 12,000 Jewish children in 189 localities were receiving religious instruction in illegal schools, and about 800 students in 22 localities were attending yeshivas—several thousand fewer than in 1926. The underground also maintained a rabbinical seminary with 36 students and a teacher-training institute with 20 students, and provided over 600 rabbis and instructors with small subsidies.

The group's welfare program—according to the 1929 decree, religious welfare work is illegal—was conducted by 15 local branches of an organization known by the traditional name of Tifereth Bachurim, whose activities Sambatyon describes in some detail. The organization's conspiratorial work was carried on by young people under the spiritual direction of eminent rabbis and laymen. Tifereth Bachurim recruited pupils

for religious instruction, raised money for the schools and provided for their defense, paid the teachers and watchmen, and collected and dispensed funds for the needy.

Although the leaders of the religious underground were constantly under police suspicion and many were arrested, the clandestine institutions they maintained managed to survive until about 1936, largely because of the support they received from individual Jews who regarded the survival of Judaism in Russia as their own responsibility.

Even women, who normally don't play a formal role in Orthodox Judaism, worked to perpetuate their religion in a hostile society. Sambatyon records a talk on the responsibilities of the pious wife and mother given by a young girl at a clandestine meeting of Tifereth Bachurim. Comparing the present with the pre-Bolshevik period, when Jews could openly be Jews, the girl dwells upon the importance of selecting the right kind of husband and properly rearing the children as “Jewish patriots” before the public schools and Soviet society engulf them entirely. “A religious girl,” she says, “must be prepared for this sacred responsibility. We must know the Bible thoroughly. We must know Jewish history from Genesis until today. Together with our mother's milk we must feed the child our devotion to the Jewish people. The lullaby we sing at the child's bedside must be imbued with sacrificial love for our God, our Torah, our people, the Hebrew language, and the Jewish homeland.”

Such words bear witness to the zeal of the religious Jews in Russia twenty years ago, and their desire to preserve Jewish identity.

NEITHER the underground religious organization nor individual observant Jews were spared by the Great Purge that began in the summer of 1936 and lasted through the end of 1938. In this general holocaust the Jewish religious community suffered its worst losses since the start of the revolution. Rabbis who had survived the arrests and deportations of the late 20's, including even

those who had made their peace with the regime, fell victim. The Bolsheviks termed any manifestation of Judaism or Jewishness as "counter-revolutionary." Parents were arrested because their children were absent from school on the High Holy Days. Jewish homes were searched for "evidence" of Jewishness, as for example the possession of Hebrew books whether religious or secular. The possession of letters from people abroad was also considered "proof" of counter-revolution. Moreover, entire families were arrested and deported because of the "guilt" of relatives dead before the revolution.

According to Sambatyon, at the start of the Great Purge in Kiev the NKVD padlocked and sealed the one synagogue still left in the main part of town because, as the local authorities informed a protesting Jewish delegation, it was a "nest of counter-revolutionaries." Sambatyon relates that then some of the older Jews sent identically worded pleas to Stalin, Kalinin, and Yezhov.

"Kiev is an old Jewish city," they wrote. "At the time of the revolution, Kiev had several hundred synagogues and smaller places of worship. Now there are only two left in Kiev: a tiny synagogue in Podol [a predominantly Jewish section in outlying Kiev], but it is very far from town. The other is the Kupiecheskaya Synagogue, in which we have worshipped for over sixty years. Now this too is padlocked and will be taken from us. We went to the local bureau and they told us that only Moscow could help us. We beg you, little father Stalin, have pity on us in our old age. Our *chederim* and *yeshivot* were closed—we were silent; our *mikvot* and kosher slaughter houses were closed—we remained silent; we have never complained, we are disciplined citizens. But the synagogue—that is our last comfort, for which we are prepared to die as our ancestors did for the Temple. . . ."

The reply came after a while: "Authority rests with the local officials." In a few weeks, the industrial section of the NKVD converted the Kupiecheskaya Synagogue into a "corrective" occupational training school for female delinquents.

Describing the further impact of the Great Purge on the Hasidic community in Kiev, Sambatyon reports that on one day alone, July 24, 1938, ninety-two of the pious were arrested, and that by the end of the summer most of the able-bodied men of that community had been imprisoned, deported, or were in hiding, so that the only observant Jews left in Kiev were women and children, the aged and infirm. The huge prison in Kiev could not contain all the new prisoners and the regional NKVD shipped the overflow to prisons in towns as far away as Berdichev, Kremenchug, and Chernigov.

The mass arrests and deportations destroyed the leadership of the religious underground or at least paralyzed their activity, but the individual survivors, in the main, clung desperately to their religion. Many Hasidim at this time, as Sambatyon tells it, compared themselves to those lost tribes inaccessible beyond the stone-casting waters of the legendary Sambatyon River, which subsides only on the Sabbath. Beyond the Sambatyon, so the legend goes, live the most pious of all Israelites, the "*royte yidelech*" (little red Jews) of Yiddish folklore. (The aptness of the figure explains the pen name of the author of *A Sixth of the World*.) But the lost pious Jews of 20th-century Russia could practice their religion only under some form of Marranism. No wonder that many of them fled to the West from Russia after the end of the recent war—which served to reduce further Russian Orthodox Jewry.

WHAT the American rabbinical delegations saw in the synagogues of Russia were the survivors of these persecutions, battered remnants of what was once a great religious community. It is these same Jews that some of the visiting rabbis call upon to rebuild Judaism in Russia. This is not beyond the realm of possibility: the survivors of the Nazi massacres have taught us something about the indomitability of the human spirit. But any hope for a renewal of the Russian Jewish community depends altogether on the will of the Soviet leaders, and why should they be expected to undo

their successful forty-year campaign against Jewish religious life? The new regime can afford a few synagogues here and there; these make useful exhibits for foreign visitors—cheap evidence of Communist “tolerance.” But the record shows that the Bolsheviks, despite occasional interludes of relaxation, have never wavered in their long-term anti-religious course.

Some of the visiting rabbis reported that the new regime promised to ameliorate the hardships borne by religious Jews. But how is one to evaluate such promises? Last spring Moscow’s Jews were told they would be able to get ritually slaughtered meat again, and indeed permission was finally granted to establish a place for the sale of such meat. However, when would-be purchasers arrive at the market—the site the authorities chose for it is ten miles outside Moscow—they find, most of the time, that no meat is to be had.

Over a year ago the Soviet Council of Religious Cults promised to publish a Jewish prayer book—none has been published in Russia since the revolution. When the delegation from the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America inquired about the progress of this project they were told that no Hebrew type was available in Russia. The alternative, they were informed, would be to reprint a prayer book from photographic plates. The rabbis, to speed the enterprise, offered to supply the Soviet Union with a Hebrew linotype machine, apparently unaware that a photo-offset edition could be completed in a week or two if the authorities really meant to keep their promise.*

Last summer the Russians said they would help observant Jews purchase citrons and palm branches for Succoth. In July an Israeli

firm was asked to quote prices and subsequently submitted to the Soviet commercial attaché a figure far below the market price. But there the matter rested. Russian Jews had no *ethrogim* or *lulavim* for Succoth.

Of far more significance than these broken promises is the Communist failure even to promise Russia’s Jews freedom of religious education, the freedom to teach their children Hebrew or Yiddish, and to instruct them in Jewish history. A religion has life, or a chance of life, only if it can be perpetuated from generation to generation, and it has been the clear intention of the Communists, since they first seized power, to see that this doesn’t happen. Russian Jews may cherish their Judaism, but there is no reason to expect the Soviet regime suddenly to reverse itself and permit them to give communal flesh and form to their longings for Jewishness.

Is the conclusion, then, that we must write the Russian Jews off insofar as the survival of Judaism as a religion is concerned? Every fact seems to point that way; none seems to support any optimistic forecast of a revival of Judaism in the USSR. What is more: the purpose of the present rulers of the Soviet appears to be not simply to eradicate Judaism as one more religion, but to extirpate the Jews as a distinctive group by wholesale forced assimilation, to which the suppression of their faith and of Yiddish culture are but preliminary steps. No other ethnic group in the Soviet Union is similarly threatened; no other ethnic group is denied in principle its right to existence.

Are the Jews of the free world to resign themselves to this state of affairs? Let us hope not. As W. Z. Laqueur pointed out in his article in last month’s COMMENTARY, “Soviet Policy and Jewish Fate,” the Soviets have become more sensitive than ever to public opinion in the world outside. Our protests should be of a kind to make themselves heard, nor should we be deluded either by our reluctance to believe the worst, or by any idea that the Soviets will give more sympathetic ear to softly spoken pleas than to forthrightly proclaimed indignation.

*According to an American Yiddish journalist, Henry Shoshkes, who recently returned from a visit to Russia and its satellites, the Soviet government has printed a prayer book in an offset edition of 3,000 copies. Mr. Shoshkes brought back a sheaf of pages presumably run off before the book was completed. Even with the dwindling number of observant Jews in Russia today, 3,000 copies will hardly suffice to meet the needs of a religious community that for almost forty years has been unable to replace banned, confiscated, or worn-out prayer books.